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L.A. police oversight of parolees causing friction

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Shift in responsibility
for ex-convicts from
state to local agencies
due to budget crunch
spurs anger, confusion.

By JASON SONG

The first four times Pamela Morris was released from prison, she would go to her state parole officers or they would occasionally make unannounced solo visits to make sure she wasn't committing new crimes.

But after Morris completed a state sentence for

shoplifting earlier this year, she reported to Los Angeles County probation officers under a new cost-cutting state program known as realignment and checked into a group home for newly released female ex-convicts.

Things were going well, Morris said, until the afternoon three LAPD officers showed up at her door, handcuffed her and searched her room.

"They scared the living mess out of me," said Morris, who added that she takes medicine for schizophrenia. "Nobody would tell me what was going on."

Rather than keeping her on the right track, Morris

said the incident was so unnerving that she briefly went back to living on the streets before returning to the group home. "It kind of set me back," she said.

The encounter at Morris' home highlights one of the new friction points created by a recent shift of responsibility for thousands of prisoners and ex-convicts from state to local authorities. Realignment was intended to relieve California's overcrowded prison system by keeping more low-level offenders in local jails rather than transferring them to state custody. And by giving local agencies more responsibility for monitoring prisoners freed on probation, the state can save hundreds of millions of dollars.

But city and county efforts to keep tabs on nearly 6,000 felons released in L.A. County alone have also prompted confusion and anger, jockeying among agencies for millions in public money and warnings that public safety employees are facing new dangers.

Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies and LAPD offi-
[See Parolees, A9]

Are foster kids helped or harmed by open hearings?

By Kelli Kennedy
The Associated Press

MIAMI — A California judge's decision to open a county's child welfare hearings earlier this year has energized a debate among advocates in other states about whether greater transparency helps or harms the young victims appearing in family court.

When a child is abused or neglected, there's a family court hearing to discuss the victim's future.

In nearly 20 states, including Texas, New York, Florida and Illinois, those hearings are usually open to the public and there is a push among child welfare advocates to open them in other states.

Efforts to open the courts in California, Kentucky and the District of Columbia have garnered attention recently. Proponents say transparency leads to better decisions by putting a spotlight on judges, exposes the blunders of child welfare workers and gives the public a better understanding of how the system works.

"Confidentiality has done more to protect the system than to protect the children in the system," said Michael Nash, chief presiding judge of Los Angeles County's children's court. He ruled in January that dependency hearings in his county will be open to the public unless there is proof the child will be harmed.

The longtime advocate of open courts was frustrated that fellow judges

frequently sided with those who wanted to keep the hearings closed. Nash said decisions were made on an ad hoc basis. His order lays out a uniform process to follow when someone objects to opening the hearing.

But critics say children will be further traumatized by testifying about abuse in a courtroom full of strangers. The Children's Law Center of California, which represents most children in the Los Angeles County system, asked the state appeals court to overturn Nash's decision, but that move was rejected.

Executive Director Leslie Starr Heimov says it's unfair to compare states that have open hearings with California because children don't have a legal right to attend hearings in many states. More than 200 children attend hearings every day at the Los Angeles courthouse.

"It's difficult and it's painful and they're in the system through no fault of their own and to create a system where they're forced to endure more pain, that's harmful," Heimov said. Family courts have opened gradually since the early 1980s, beginning with Oregon. An advocate for child welfare reform says that among the states that have followed suit, New York and Missouri's moves in the late 1990s were particularly significant. The change is usually spurred by a horrific child abuse case or a push from local media to gain access.

But the practice can vary by county or by judge, even in states that are presumed to be open. A New York Times reporter visited local courtrooms at random last year and found that many were closed with locked doors or hostile deputies.

Still, the reverse can be true in states that are generally closed. For example, courts in Allegheny County, Pa., were opened after a news outlet fought for access, but most of the state is still closed, said Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform in Virginia. No one has compiled national data on how counties treat the issue.

Kentucky Rep. Susan Westrom filed a bill for the third time in March that would open courts under a pilot program. The bill passed the House, but died in the Senate.

"Social workers were identified as falsifying records and lying in court, and I heard horror stories from family court judges. The lack of transparency has harmed far too many families and children in Kentucky," Westrom said. Among several recent efforts in California was legislation proposing a pilot program to open courts in a few counties. It died in committee last year.

Activist Gail Helms has fought for open courts in California since her 2-year-old grandson Lance was beaten to death by his father in 1995, shortly after the man was awarded custody department of Children and Family.

despite a history of drug use. The boy's father was sentenced to 25 years in prison for second-degree murder.

She said public court proceedings would have exposed holes in the child welfare system and put pressure on the judge to take her son's drug use and criminal history more seriously. Spurred by the case, lawmakers eventually changed state child welfare laws to make it harder for abusive parents to regain custody.

"They need to have someone in there to monitor and see what goes on in those courtrooms," said Helms, whose efforts have included protests and remarks at public forums.

But former California foster youth Michael Bowen Dural said that opening dependency court may solve some problems, but it creates others — such as compromising children's privacy. The change also doesn't affect other problems in the system such as social workers having too many cases, said Bowen Dural, who entered foster care at birth when he was taken from his drug-addicted mother and who stayed in the system until he turned 18.

"The laws should include you in deciding whether you want it open or not because every foster kid is at a different point in their life and at a different comfort level with some of the things that are discussed in court," said Dural, 24. He now works in the housing department for the L.A. County Department of Children and Family.

LAPD takes on 'compliance checks'



PAMELA MORRIS, right, confers with Susan Burton of the New Way of Life group home in South L.A. Morris was handcuffed and searched by LAPD officers even though she was in full compliance with her probation.

DON BABBLETT/Los Angeles Times

cers have expanded duties for periodic "compliance checks" on the reassigned former inmates, who served time for nonviolent crimes. The volume of checks means that probation officers, who may already know the ex-convicts and be better positioned to defuse situations that can become confrontational, often aren't available to go along.

In many cases, like Morris', police or deputies working in teams roll up in multiple squad cars. Law enforcement officials say officers may not know what they are walking into and that teams help ensure safety. Moreover, under the terms of their release, parolees and probationers generally are subject to warrantless searches at any time, they note.

But critics, including some elected officials, argue that in some cases, the tactics being used are needlessly intimidating and expensive.

al crime.

Morris, 45, said she has spent the last decade bounding in and out of jail and prison for shoplifting or violating her parole by not taking her medication.

She said she had a troubled upbringing with her mother's family in Gardena and only occasionally saw her father, who lived in New York. At 12, she recalled, she was so distraught leaving him after a visit that she got a teardrop tattoo under her right eye.

She first went to jail in 1999, for stealing clothes from a Target store. Ten years later, she said, she was arrested for the same offense: taking baby clothes from an Old Navy in Manhattan Beach.

While serving a three-year sentence at a state prison for women in Chowchilla, Morris said she decided to turn her life around, which led her to the New Way of Life group home in Watts after her release in January.

need to move cautiously in

divvying up a limited amount of realignment funding.

"There are some depart-

ments that see this as an opportunity to grab a chunk of cash," said Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky. "We should be husbanding our money and being conservative, not overly generous in how we appropriate the money."

Those money concerns

underscore the need to reexamine the tactics employed in compliance checks, some say.

"They're having four people do the job of one person," said Jeff Christensen, project director of the nonprofit Sober Living Network, which advocates for group homes. Christensen said he's heard more complaints in the last five months about compliance checks than he received over the previous decade.

Realignment, officials say, is limited to ex-inmates whose last conviction was for a nonviolent or nonsexu-

al testing, attended several counseling sessions a day and took a daily round of medications.

"For the first time, I really wanted help," Morris said.

On the day of the compliance check, she said, she had just finished telling Ridley-Thomas and other visiting officials about the progress she was making. When she was approached by three officers and placed in handcuffs, she said, "I thought I was getting arrested."

She said little during the incident, Morris said. The video shows New Way of Life's executive director, Susan Burton, angrily confronting the officers in the street afterward.

Burton demanded their business cards and asked why they had handcuffed Morris.

"This is a waste of tax-payer money," Burton tells the officers at one point.

Morris said she appreciated "Tingrides' apology. But she worries about her next compliance check.

"I don't want to get hand-cuffed again," she said. "I've done my time and trying to start a clean slate."

"It really erodes trust when four cars and several officers pull up," said Mark Fauchette, vice president of the Amity Foundation, which runs a residential treatment facility near USC.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, who happened to be visiting Morris' group home when the LAPD officers arrived, expressed concern about the amount of scarce law enforcement resources being used for the program. "It's not cost-effective, particularly when there was no imminent threat of danger," he said.

Ridley-Thomas said he

video of the meeting shows Tingrides telling Morris he was sorry she felt embarrassed but that the officers acted appropriately.

In a Times interview, he said that the same team had found guns "during other compliance checks. It is not like we can go into these checks knowing beforehand that one person is a big deal and another isn't," he said.

Still, Tingrides said he hopes officers can undergo more training because the searches are creating tension. "If we keep going as we are, we are going to alienate people," he said.

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Beck confirmed the con-

versation in an email. "This is a new role for us, and we are working to develop the protocols that our officers

use with this population," he said.

The compliance checks top a growing list of controversies quietly brewing as realignment takes hold in communities across California. Other complaints include cuts in public transportation assistance for newly released inmates and delayed payments to non-profit groups providing drug counseling, job training and other services intended to keep ex-convicts from committing new crimes.

The state gave Los Angeles County about \$120 million this fiscal year for its law enforcement and social service obligations under the realignment program. Given the state budget shortfall, it's unclear how much may be provided next year. An estimated \$10.6 million of that will be spent by the county Sheriff's Department on compliance checks. A team of 50 deputies, plus other personnel, are assigned to the effort. The

LAPD estimates that checks on ex-convicts in its territory will cost the city more than \$35 million a year. Thus far, it has been unable to obtain reimbursement through the county.

LAPD officials say they asked for probation officers to be assigned to each of the department's 21 stations to assist in compliance checks. But only five were assigned because of the cost.

Unions representing probation officers say the checks would be more efficient — and less risky — if their members were involved. Leaders of the groups recently wrote county supervisors, criticizing them for not hiring more staff to deal with added increased workloads.

"We are all collectively sitting on a tinderbox waiting to explode," they wrote. "It is no longer a case of 'if' an officer gets injured in the line of duty; it is a matter of 'when.'"

But supervisors say they